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ABSTRACT

Assessment of preschoolers with handicaps presents a challenge to assessment personnel due to the children's unwillingness to separate from their parents, non-compliant behaviors, short attention spans, limited expressive language, and other problems. Planning and scheduling considerations include scheduling assessments when the child is well-rested and avoiding undue length of assessment. Preparing the environment for assessment involves having adjustable tables and foot rests, reinforcers, and toys. Parents of preschoolers exhibit some behaviors which are different from the behaviors seen in the parents of school-age children, such as unwillingness to separate, angry reaction to the labeling of a handicap, and lack of understanding of the special education process. Suggestions for putting parents at ease include introducing parents to each member of the assessment team and maintaining a friendly but professional attitude. A list of eight suggested readings concludes the paper. (JDD)

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ASSESSMENT OF PRESCHOOLERS: HINTS FOR EVALUATION PERSONNEL

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ASSESSMENT OF PRESCHOOLERS: HINTS FOR ASSESSMENT PERSONNEL

Since the 1960's the Federal government has become increasingly involved in the development of policy for preschool education. School incentive grants have been amended to include children B-3 and state plans to include children B-5, events which have occurred since the passage of P.L. 98-199, The Education of the Handicapped Act amendments of 1983. Few states have regulations requiring educational services for all handicapped children B-5 (Edmister & Ekstrand, 1987). Most states identify specific subgroups whom they will serve. The real difficulty then becomes location and identification of these handicapped preschoolers. Handicapped preschoolers present a real challenge to assessment personnel because they are such a unique group. Frequently there are separation problems, non-compliant behaviors, short attention spans, and limited expressive language. Parents of preschoolers also present a unique set of behaviors including their own separation anxiety.

Assessment personnel who deal frequently with preschoolers need to develop some skills and to adjust their testing environment to meet the special needs of preschoolers.

The following are just a few of the behaviors often exhibited by preschoolers:

1. They are shy and often unwilling to separate.
2. They are less able to adapt to change.
3. They may be wary of new situations and new people. They need "warm-up" time.
4. They exhibit a highly independent response style. "Making" them comply is a lost cause.
5. Preschoolers are active and will not respond well to prolonged sitting. Provide breaks, opportunity to change tasks.
6. Preschoolers are curious. Expect them to grab test materials

out of the kit or away from you.

7. Attention spans are short. Vary tasks, take frequent breaks, change the setting - try sitting on the floor for awhile.
8. They will not always tell you of their needs, watch for signs of need for comfort stop.
9. Illness is common, particularly upper respiratory infections. Cough and runny nose are common as is the need to reschedule.
10. Preschoolers tire easily and this necessitates short testing sessions over a couple days as opposed to one long session.

There are planning and scheduling considerations which are different for preschoolers than they would be for the typical school age student. Evaluation should be conducted at a time during the child's natural waking hours and not interrupt the scheduled nap time. A critical consideration is to avoid undue length. Remember that fatigue is less likely to interfere with the child's performance when several breaks have been taken and when the required tasks are novel and interesting. Sometimes rescheduling becomes necessary when it is clear that no useful test results will be obtained or that the results will be invalidated by the child's uncooperative behavior. Preschool performance is unpredictable, so assessment personnel should be prepared to remain flexible.

Some planning must go into preparing the environment for the assessment of preschoolers. In terms of large equipment, an adjustable table that is the right height for the child should be considered. The child's elbows should rest comfortably on the table and their feet should rest comfortably on the floor. If the child's feet do not reach the floor, place a box under his/her feet to minimize the restless behavior that results from having no physical restraint from the floor. Another useful piece of equipment is the preschool chair with a seat belt and an adjustable foot rest. There are also u-shaped tables of preschool height that help to define the testing area. Smaller environmental changes include reinforcers like balloons, stickers, small party favors (like tiny

bears or dinosaurs), or Cheerios (these are only used when the child will not respond to any reinforcers except food and then only with parental permission). A toybox in the testing room is a popular addition for preschoolers. Items to consider for inclusion include coloring books, wooden puzzles with 4-10 pieces, Leggos, wooden blocks, story books, shape boxes, and puppets. A kitchen center featuring refrigerator, stove, sink, cooking utensils and empty food boxes is always a popular place as is a corner with a chalk board.

The parents of preschoolers exhibit some behaviors which are different from the behaviors seen in the parents of school age children. Parents of school age children frequently have had more experience with the evaluation process and the special education services which become available following evaluation.
The following behaviors , although seen in other parents, are notable for their frequency among parents of preschool children:

1. Preschool parents are often unwilling to separate.
2. They often consider this preschooler to be the family "baby."
3. They are anxious about the whole assessment and the preschool program itself.
4. The assessor may be the first one to label a handicap and parents sometimes react with anger.
5. They want answers to questions like,"When will he/she catch up?" "Will he/she have problems learning in the regular academic grades?"
6. Like the parents of other children receiving service for the first time, these parents need help to understand the special education process, their rights, terminology, and the types of services which will be available. Evaluation personnel must be careful with terms like I.E.P., O.T., or SLP as these parents often are unaware of the meaning, but too afraid or intimidated to ask.

Taking time with the parents of preschool children and maintaining a friendly while professional attitude help to put parents at ease. Some other suggestions which assessment personnel may find helpful include:

1. Explain the purpose, nature and possible outcomes of testing.
2. Be clear about how long the assessment will take. Mention how long the child will remain with each assessor.
3. Introduce the parents to each member of the assessment team.
4. Show them around and point out areas such as restrooms, drinking fountain, telephone, and snack/beverage machines.
5. Solicit their help. Inquire about favorite reinforcers, how to maintain attention to task, siblings' and/or pets' names, favorite toys, or the child's nickname.
6. Don't force separation. If parents resist separation, allow one parent to be present during the evaluation. The best solution to this dilemma is to have an observation room; however, not all facilities provide this feature.

Years of experience and/or an excellent training program are not necessarily enough to prepare assessment personnel to work well with preschoolers. Their unique behaviors are frequently enough to try the patience of the most experienced assessor. The following include some suggestions for testing preschoolers which assessment personnel may wish to try:

1. Enthusiasm and timing are important motivational factors when assessing preschool children.
2. Repetitive and stereotyped comments like "you're working hard" soon become perfunctory and lose their reinforcement value.
3. Examiners must be careful not to startle the child by talking too loudly or by being too formal. Avoid "baby talk" but at the same time reduce vocabulary to a preschool level without talking down to the child.
4. Be aware that the motive behind the child's behavior may be unclear and require that the examiner "read" carefully the child's intent. Familiarity with tests and a great deal of experience with young children should help the examiner to understand the child's feelings and to differentiate true failure from resistant comments like, "I don't know," "I can't " which may really mean, "I don't want to" or "I am afraid." "You do it" or "You show me" may really indicate emotional dependency rather than real inability.
5. Be prepared to move around more during the evaluation of preschoolers. Most young children respond well to an examiner who picks them up to comfort them when necessary, takes a playful poke at them, gets down on the floor to play, puts an arm around their shoulders or takes their hand when entering or leaving the examining room.

Many examiners like to read about the population they will have to test. The following is a brief list of readings which may be helpful:

Baker, L. (1988). Speech/language assessment of mentally retarded preschoolers. Seminars in Speech and Language, 9, 73-80.

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